



# Alpha Weekend Organiser Guidelines

# The Alpha Weekend Guidelines

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These guidelines are designed for people who are either starting Alpha and want to go away for a weekend or are currently running Alpha with a day away and want to move to a weekend.

## Why a weekend?

There are two main advantages to an Alpha weekend.

### 1. Space and time

Taking people away for a weekend gives them time away from the distractions of everyday life to think about the issues raised in the talks

Some people who aren't receptive to being prayed for on the Saturday night are much more receptive by Sunday morning, just having a few hours to process their thoughts.

### 2. Community

A Weekend away has the advantage that friendships are cemented as people travel, have meals together, go for walks and enjoy the entertainment and that in a relaxed environment people start to relax and the barriers start to come down.

Here is a quote from a recent **Alpha guest**.

*'I was nervous about going away, but I'd committed to doing it so I went. I am self employed so it was great to be able to get away from it all. Just being with people who are more genuine and down to earth than I meet in day to day business.*

*The fact that it was over a weekend was excellent. I needed time to take it all in.*

*The evening entertainment was such fun and an integral part of the weekend. On the Saturday afternoon we were able to take some time out to go for a stroll on the beach.'*

And another from an **Alpha course administrator**:

*'We have now attended 3 Alpha weekends away. Before them we had 'away days' and crammed a lot in, but the weekends away were better.*

*A talking point after the weekend and on Sunday is the success of Saturday evenings and the 'entertainment.'*

*I personally don't see anything better than the weekends.'*

And finally another **course administrator**:

*'We had been doing an Alpha Day for sometime and then went to doing a Weekend at "Home" in 2004 i.e. at a location in our town which seemed to work well. My wife felt that we should move to a Weekend away but I thought why reinvent the wheel and spoke to this effect in team meetings and so we stayed at home.*

*However, in 2006, my wife persevered and the Team unanimously decided to go away for the Weekend. After the Weekend away I had to admit that I was amazed at how much better it had proved to be in comparison with running the weekend at home.....this was especially evident in the closer bonding of the small groups and the very relaxed atmosphere which guests and team members experienced over the Weekend.'*

## First steps

### 1. ■ Make the decision to move to an Alpha weekend.

This may seem obvious but at some point you need to make a decision and go for it. It will be a risk – because you don't know how many people will attend – but have faith in God. Time and again at Holy Trinity Brompton it has looked as though the finances wouldn't work out and time and again God has been faithful.

You may like to attend a weekend to see how they are run. Please contact Alpha UK to see if you can either join Holy Trinity Brompton or if there are other weekends near you.

### 2. ■ Plan ahead.

Once you have made the decision to move to a weekend you will need to book up a venue – they tend to get booked up well in advance.

### 3. ■ Think about finances.

You will probably have to pay a deposit as soon as you book the weekend. It is worth considering your policy on paying for the weekend in advance. If at all possible money shouldn't be an issue for anyone wishing to attend the weekend – which means that you will need some kind of bursary system.

The rest of these guidelines are split into two main sections.

1. Administrating an Alpha weekend – covering the logistics and practicalities of making the weekend happen.
2. How to introduce the weekend on the Alpha course – covering what the Alpha course leader needs to say to introduce the weekend and how to encourage guests to attend.

# **Administrating an Alpha Weekend**

## ***Where can I find a suitable venue?***

You may already know of a suitable venue for your Alpha Weekend. However, if you need some advice do consult:

- Your local Alpha Adviser or Resource Church

If you are running a course in the UK you can also use:

- The UK Christian Handbook
- CCI Venue finding site ([www.cci.org.uk](http://www.cci.org.uk) or 01908 641641) - this is an organisation set up to find Christian retreat venues for groups. (Sadly, they cannot help for venues for the Alpha Day Away).

It is always a good idea to team up with other churches in your area and to organise a weekend together. Not only can this ease the administrative burden on a single church but may be more cost effective and it is always more fun!

## ***What to look for in a venue?***

How many people can it cater for?

What type of rooms does it have available?

What facilities are there to relax – sport, walks, seaside etc?

What rooms are available for the main sessions, for crèche facilities, for dining, for the entertainment?

What catering does the venue offer? Are they flexible with timings? Do they offer special menus for vegetarians etc?

What technical facilities do they offer (TV, DVD, PA)? Will you be able to take technical items they don't have?

Will they provide cots or early meals for children?

## ***Planning a budget***

Most venues charge on a per person basis, so accounting should be easy. There should not be any significant extra costs.

Obviously, to attract as many people as possible to the weekend, try to keep the cost of the weekend as low as possible.

If at all possible, don't let money be an issue which prevents someone from attending the Alpha Weekend Away. Some will not be able to pay but others will be able to pay more. We ask people to contribute what they can afford – for example what they would spend if they were staying in their home town over a weekend.

On the Sunday morning of the weekend take a collection from all the course members, letting them know what the financial short-fall is.

## ***Timetable***

A complete timetable is included in appendix 1.

### **1. Arrival**

Have a desk set-up in 'reception' with a list of all of the guests who will be attending. Put up a couple of signs to welcome people and so it is clear where they have to go on arrival.

Encourage the leaders and helpers to have arrived before the guests.

People will be nervous on arrival so you will need to be as welcoming as possible. Why not have some sweets for everyone as they come in.

In the event of unexpected arrivals you will need to have a list of any spare rooms and a list of local B&Bs that they can book into if the venue is full.

### **2. Talks**

If you would like someone to give talks on your Alpha Weekend away, contact your local Alpha Adviser or Resource Church (you can find them online at [alphafriends.org](http://alphafriends.org)). They may be able to suggest a guest speaker who you can invite. Alternatively, contact Alpha UK, who may be able to arrange for an HTB pastorate team to help with talks.

It is also possible to run the weekend using the DVDs. You can purchase a DVD with just the Alpha weekend talks from the Alpha Publications Hotline (Tel: 0845 758 1278 or [alphashop.org](http://alphashop.org)).

### **3. Group times**

The group times at the weekend occur after the second talk (What does the Holy Spirit do?) and before the Sunday morning talk (How can I make the most of the rest of my life?).

Guidelines for how to lead these group times can be found in the Alpha Leaders' Manual.

### **4. Saturday Afternoon**

Make full use of any facilities available to you. Arrange for someone to organise sports or other events during the free time. Encourage the group leaders to keep the groups together. Guests who didn't respond well to the talks on the Holy Spirit will often talk enthusiastically about the walk on the beach or the game of football.

### **5. Saturday night entertainment**

After the talk on the Saturday evening of the Alpha Weekend it is good to give guests an opportunity to relax.

If you have a small number on your weekend you might like to play a game (eg Pictionary) which can be played by any age group.

If you have larger numbers on your Alpha Weekend you might prefer to have a cabaret-style entertainment evening. The aim of this is to have 'good clean fun' and you may find some very talented people on your course!

Ask someone to be in charge of co-ordinating the entertainments and give them a photocopy of the list of organiser's instructions (Appendix 2). They may be able to act as host for the evening and introduce each act.

Half way between a game and a cabaret is to organise a 'pub' quiz (with no religious questions). To keep it fun (and not too competitive) tell people that they can gain extra points by coming out to the front to tell a joke, or a song etc.

## ***Families***

As churches we want to encourage family life. Invite family members of those on the course to come on the Alpha Weekend. They do not have to come to talks and are welcome to join in the entertainments and meals.

Consider having children's workers available for the weekend. Remember to ensure that any legal requirements regarding childcare are met. Select someone to organise the childcare for the weekend.

If possible make sure you have taken a TV and DVD player to help keep the children occupied!

## ***Timing in the course***

The ideal time for the Alpha Weekend is between Weeks 6 and 7 of the course. It should always fall between Week 5 and Week 8. It is always preferable to have the talk 'How Can I Resist Evil?' following the Weekend. If necessary switch around the talks on Evil and Guidance.

You can begin to circulate forms for people to sign up for the weekend from Week 3 so that it is already in people's diaries (see more tips on this below).

## ***Venue liaison***

It is important to liaise with the venue about:

- Sheets, towels, soap
- Communion wine (establish who will provide it)
- Sound & recording equipment, overhead projector
- Bookshop - check that they are happy for you to take your own stock
- Special diets / Disability Access
- Sports facilities
- Cots and early meals for small children
- Childcare facilities
- A map and directions to the venue which you can reproduce for the guests
- A blank bedroom plan
- The Weekend schedule
- Venue specific criteria (e.g. do they allow alcohol on site?)

## ***Transport***

Encourage people to arrange their own lifts/transport within the small groups. You may be able to provide a coach if you have a large course.

## ***Bedroom plan***

Ask the venue to provide a plan of all of the rooms – with information about bathrooms and occupancy for each room. You can then start to work on a plan for the rooms.

- Be careful about unmarried couples. Make it clear to them, in a sensitive manner, that unmarried couples cannot share a room. If they are unhappy about this, suggest that they book alternative accommodation nearby
- Remember to put single parents somewhere central
- Try to keep members of each small group in adjacent bedrooms
- Leave the planning until the last minute to allow for late changes.
- If there are shared bathrooms make sure there are single sex bathrooms

## **Checklist**

<b>Alpha WeekendAway Checklist</b>	
Book the venue	
Liaise with the venue	
Select someone to arrange childcare	
Ask someone to arrange afternoon activities	
Ask someone to organise the evening entertainment	
Arrange transport to the weekend	
Complete your bedroom plan	
Keep a list of who is coming and who has paid	
<b>Remember to take:</b>	
Any technical equipment required (If not provided by the venue)	
Wine goblets	
Bread and wine for communion	
Baskets for the collection and also for bread	
A lectern (if not provided)	
A cashbox with change for outstanding payments	
A calculator	
Spare weekend schedules	
Equipment and toys for childcare	
Name badges	
Songbooks, spare Bibles and manuals	
Tissues	
Latest Bedroom plan	

## **Working with other churches**

To make the weekend more fun why not join with other churches. It means more people will get to attend. There are economies of scale in going for a larger venue and it sends out a powerful message of Christian unity to the guests.

It is also a huge blessing to smaller courses that might not be able to manage a weekend on their own.

### ***Marketing the weekend***

The first step is to join with churches that you have worked with on other projects.

Also contact all Alpha courses within a certain radius of your church and the venue (ask the Alpha UK office for their details). Send an email or letter to them inviting them to come along.

The earlier you let people know the more that other Alpha course administrators can plan their Alpha courses around the weekend away.

Over time you will find that momentum will build and word will spread about the Weekend that you and other churches organiser. This will mean that you won't need as much time advertising to local churches.

### ***Practicalities of working with other churches***

In the initial letter or email you can just give out basic details. Once people have shown an interest send them a complete timetable, cost breakdown and additional information such as childcare responsibilities.

Get other churches to pay a per person deposit – depending on how many places they want. This helps to spread the financial risk of the weekend. Of course, numbers always fluctuate on Alpha but you need assurance that they aren't just going to pull out!

Each church should offer their own guests bursaries (students, pensioners, the unemployed etc) - there is a collection to make up the shortfall and you will need to work out in advance how that will work. Each group will be associated with a particular church so you could have a collection basket for each group. That way each church can work out how much has been collected from their guests.

Each church should provide their own child carers to look after their guests' children (of course all child carers and children can join up together on the weekend).

Each church should take responsibility for hosting and looking after their own guests.

Each church must complete all 3 sessions of the small group leaders and helpers training.

## Introducing the Alpha Weekend Away to your Alpha course

These guidelines take you through what happens from the front – what is said by the Alpha course leader – and behind the scenes.

### **Alpha leader role**

It is good idea to start mentioning the Alpha Weekend from week 2 – just to get the date in people's diaries. You might like to say something like:

*'The Weekend is coming up – [date]. It is a really important part of the course, it is great fun. Please get that into your diaries.'*

On week 3, you could say a lot more about the weekend:

*'Now, a Christian Weekend – you are probably thinking of a cell with a candle in it! But this is not going to be like that. Think more of a weekend away in the country with some friends. We are going to a really beautiful place and there are some really lovely walks, there are some tennis courts, there's a swimming pool and the sea is really warm [winter] in the place that we're going! And it will be lots of fun. But also we're looking at a really important part of the course, which is the person and work of the Holy Spirit. So it is a really exciting thing to be looking at.'*

By week 4 you might talk about the fact that there are bursaries available. *'If you can't afford to come, we still want you to come. Whether you can afford to or whether you can't, we want you to bring your husbands, wives, children. We have excellent childcare provided.'* Talk more about what a lovely place it is and what fun it is going to be. It is a time when lots of friendships gel in the small groups. Sometimes we talk about a questionnaire: *'You may be wondering why I'm going on so much about the weekend. Here is a questionnaire received at the end of the course. Somebody wrote on the questionnaire under "In what way could the course be improved?" – "Please emphasise the weekend more. I missed the weekend and I was so disappointed when my group came back and talked about it and I realised what I missed out on." So that is why we are emphasising it, because we have been asked to.'*

Then week 5 it's good to talk about the weekend – transport, fun weekend, beautiful place, important subject, etc. This way you are continually building up to the weekend or day away.

In weeks 2 to 5 it is good to build the emphasis on the weekend but by week 6 it is not such a good idea to be building up the weekend. At this stage there are three days to go and it looks desperate if you're still trying to persuade people to come on the weekend three days before! Still briefly encourage people to come.

The experience at Holy Trinity Brompton is that the numbers tend to go up in weeks 3, 4 and 5 and then dip week 6 if the impression given from the front is that there is still plenty of space. However, if on week 6, the course leader says *'I'm so sorry, the weekend is full. We can't take any more people.'* The numbers go up even further and the extra guests are put in bed & breakfasts to fit everybody in.

Of course, it is important to be completely honest, once you start saying things that are not true or a slight exaggeration, you lose all integrity and credibility. However, if

the weekend really is full, that is the biggest incentive for people to come. The guests' biggest worry is that they are going to be the only person there and once they know that everybody else is going, they want to go.

### ***Behind the scenes***

The previous section looked at what the person who is introducing each evening should say to build the momentum to the weekend. This next section looks at what the group leaders and helpers should be saying and doing during dinner and small group time.

The guests may not be as keen as you are on the idea of a Christian weekend away!! As well as tangible concerns that they have such as childcare, cost etc they may not like the idea of a weekend spent with Christians. Their main fear is that they will be the only person on the weekend who isn't a Christian. If the group leader announces the weekend to the whole group and asks who is interested, more often than not, the only person to speak will be the person who says 'I'm definitely not going' so this reinforces everyone's fear.

To help reassure the guests that they won't be the only Christian to attend the weekend the small group leaders should go to the most enthusiastic person and see if they want to go and then work through the group. As an example, imagine that 'Pat' is the most enthusiastic person in the group then on week 3 (which is a good week to start to take numbers for the weekend). By this point in the course you can usually tell who the keenest people are.

The group leader says to Pat: *'Pat, the weekend is coming up – we (the group leaders and helpers) will be going - are you interested? They are always such fun'* She is the most enthusiastic and is likely to say that she would love to come on the weekend.

On week 4 the leader goes to 'Matt' (who is the second most enthusiastic person in the group) and say, *'Matt, (the group leaders and helpers) are going on the weekend, Pat's going, what about you, Matt?'* And Matt says, *'Oh, if Pat's coming, maybe I'll come.'* Then we go to Dee and we say, *'Dee, Pat's coming, Matt's coming. What about you?'* And she says, *'Oh, if Pat and Matt are coming, well, maybe I'll come.'* Then go to Gaynor and say, *'Gaynor, Dee and Pat and Matt are coming. What about you?'* *'Oh, if Pat and Matt and Dee are coming, well, maybe I'll come.'*

Encourage the leaders and helpers to work right through the enthusiastic people. Then it is fine to say the whole group, *'The weekend is coming up, (the leaders and helpers) are going, Matt, Gaynor, Dee and Pat are going what about you?'*

Don't worry at week 3 if lots of people say they can't make the weekend. Experience has shown that people will often decline at week 3 but change their minds as the weeks progress, particularly as more people start to sign up.

Over the years at there have been stories of people cancelling trips to foreign countries, social engagements and even their own birthday party(!) to make it to the Alpha Weekend.

## Appendices

### ***Appendix 1 - Suggested timetable for the Alpha Weekend***

Distribute your timetable to the guests two weeks before they go on the Alpha Weekend with the timetable on one side and a map of how to get to the venue on the other. This is a sample of what the timetable might look like.

#### **Alpha Weekend Timetable**

##### **Friday**

6.30 pm onwards	Arrive
7.00 pm - 10.00 pm	Supper
9.45 pm	A short introduction to the weekend

##### **Saturday**

8.30 am	Breakfast
9.30 am	Worship <b>Who Is the Holy Spirit?</b>
10.45 am	Coffee
11.15 am	<b>What Does the Holy Spirit Do?</b>
12.00 pm	Small groups
1.00 pm	Lunch Afternoon - free
4.15 pm	Tea - optional!
5.00 pm	Worship <b>How Can I Be Filled With the Spirit?</b>
7.00 pm	Supper
8.30 pm	Entertainment - if you would like to contribute a song, sketch or anything, come prepared! (participation voluntary!)

##### **Sunday**

9.00 am	Breakfast
9.45 am	Small groups
10.30 am	<b>How Can I Make the Most of the Rest of My Life?</b> Informal Holy Communion
1.00 pm	Lunch Afternoon free - but see you at the evening service

Don't forget to bring:

- Bible, *Alpha Course Manual* and notebook
- A sketch, song etc for the entertainment
- Sports gear
- Waterproofs
- Towel & soap

## ***Appendix 2 - Alpha Weekend Entertainments***

### **Organiser's Instructions**

The entertainments are a crucial part of the Alpha Weekend and are a great way of breaking barriers and unifying the group. However, they are also a potential disaster area if they go on too long or if some of the material is inappropriate.

The role of the organiser of the entertainments is to raise everyone's enthusiasm for the entertainments, encouraging people/groups to contribute acts and to collect the acts – ensuring that each act passes the pointers below. The entertainment could comprise of sketches, skits or musical pieces. It sometimes takes quite a lot of tact to deal with difficult people who want to do the act, which may be unsuitable – so always be loving. The last part of the job is to comper the evening – linking up all the acts and rallying the audience.

Here are some pointers to help the evening go smoothly:

1. There should be nothing religious
2. There should be nothing with unhelpful innuendo
3. There should be no in-jokes
4. The entertainments should, ideally, last for no longer than one hour in total
5. Begin at 8.30 pm and end before 9.45 pm
6. Keep a record of any acts that you thought worked particularly well so you can get the scripts for future use

If you have any problems or doubts please always ask the administrator or the leader of the weekend.